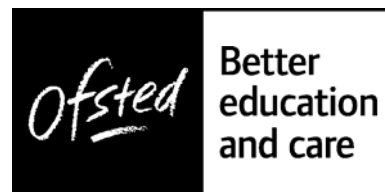


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Mr K King
Acting Headteacher
St Mary's Catholic Primary School
Cruso Street
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Staffordshire
5 April 2006

Dear Mr King

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST MARY'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 8 and 9 March 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with senior staff and the acting headteacher, governors, a representative of the local authority, other staff and pupils.

Context

The school has appointed an acting headteacher until July 2006 to cover the absence of the previous headteacher who has now resigned. The acting deputy headteacher is also in post until at least July 2006. The Governors have re-advertised for a substantive headteacher following an earlier unsuccessful recruitment campaign.

Achievement and standards

The overall standards achieved in the 2005 national tests were reviewed in the previous letter. There are also some areas of improving performance. More pupils now reach the expected level in science and there has been a recent improvement in the number of younger pupils achieving the expected level in mathematics. Evidence from lesson observations and pupils' work indicates that the rate of progress is improving in many areas but in particular in basic literacy and numeracy. The school confidently anticipates a strong performance in the national tests in 2006 for both 7- and 11-year-old pupils.

In mathematics, pupils show an increasing ability to use basic number skills to solve word problems, an improving knowledge of multiplication tables and an understanding of graphical representation and shape and space. A welcome recent development is an increased emphasis on developing mental strategies to solve problems and an ability to explain these strategies orally. However, pupils do not always show confidence in using formal strategies to calculate and do not yet explain their working out with clarity.

The standard of handwriting remains unsatisfactory. However, sentence construction, spelling and the use of increased vocabulary in writing show signs of continued improvement. The pupils are confident in their use of a wide vocabulary and are able to use extended speech to express subtle emotions. These improvements are being supported by the introduction of creative afternoon sessions where pupils can develop literacy skills through other subject areas.

Personal development and well-being

It is noticeable that overall behaviour has improved considerably since the last inspection visit and is now mainly good. The majority of pupils show an enthusiasm for learning and good attitudes in class. The school has worked hard to improve the management of behaviour in classes and around the school and this is now starting to show positive results. Despite this, younger pupils sometimes feel that the older ones dominate the playground.

The school has worked hard to improve attendance and it is now in line with national averages, although data for the current year indicate a variation between year groups and a recent dip. There have been no exclusions since the last inspection and registration sessions are conducted punctually.

Staff continue to work hard to make sure the pupils are safe and enjoy their learning. The pupils say they enjoy school and look forward to lessons. There are plans for staff to attend training in child protection. The school council takes its role seriously and the increasing range of after school activities is proving popular and successful. As a result of these changes the pupils show higher levels of enthusiasm and improved attitudes to learning.

The pupils' spiritual, moral and emotional development is now good and a strong catholic ethos is evident in assemblies and daily acts of worship and prayer. Their cultural development is also satisfactory but there are too few examples of the wider cultural world they live in. The pupils are increasingly given opportunities to make a positive contribution to their community and take greater levels of responsibility through charitable work and community activity. Staff provide frequent references to the need to develop a healthy lifestyle.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved and is satisfactory. There were some examples of good and outstanding teaching and no lessons were judged to be inadequate. A particular area of improvement is in teachers' use of questioning to assess pupils' understanding and promote higher levels of thinking.

Where teaching was good or outstanding, the lessons were well planned and taught with genuine enthusiasm. Teachers maintained a well judged pace throughout the session and encouraged pupils to work independently. Increased opportunities to explain and discuss their work are enabling better progress to be made in mathematics and English. The best lessons had suitable activities reflecting the range of ages and abilities in the group, clear explanations about what teachers expected pupils to do and good use of imaginative resources. The standard of marking has improved since the last visit and guidance on how the work could be improved and what is expected is now commonplace alongside encouraging comments.

There remains room for improvement in some lessons where not all pupils were engaged during the main part of the session and expectations were too low, leading to slow progress. On occasions, pupils' misconceptions and errors go unchecked, especially in mathematics, and not all teachers use opportunities to support literacy in other lessons. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support teaching is satisfactory overall but not yet consistent across the school. Similarly, there remains a variation in the quality of assessment information collected between classes.

The school has worked hard to improve the curriculum for the youngest pupils. The range and suitability of activities are now more appropriate and the high ratio of adults to children is providing good support for the youngest pupils. The curriculum now on offer for all pupils is broad and balanced and increasingly imaginative, using a range of visits and experiences.

The school has recently revised the targets for the oldest pupils to reflect their increasing ambition. There is now good provision for those pupils with learning difficulties and this has helped their progress improve. Teachers plan effectively for support staff and make good use of their time.

The school has improved the level and quality of assessment in school. There are now monitoring and assessment sessions each half term. Lesson observations and work scrutiny help to evaluate the standards achieved. Pupils can usually say what their personal learning targets are and these are generally used in lessons to measure progress. The school has appropriate plans to share the good practice more widely in the future.

Relationships with parents are now good. There are frequent opportunities for parents to contribute to the school via shared assemblies and 'open door classroom' sessions. Pupil recruitment is increasing.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- use the school's assessment information and data effectively to improve the pace of pupils' progress and to ensure all pupils achieve suitably high standards – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

The governors remain committed and actively involved in the school's progress. They have recently completed a round of school visits and have an accurate view of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the school. They are increasingly focusing their monitoring on the standards achieved by pupils and have taken decisive steps to try to resolve the uncertainty regarding staffing. They have recently co-opted new governors with a background in education to help hold the school to account and increase the level of challenge to the school's managers. Governors attend training and have an increasingly pro-active approach to decision making.

The acting headteacher continues to provide effective guidance and support to the school's development. He is making appropriate changes to the school's timetable and curriculum and continues to secure improvement. He is managing to maintain an appropriate balance between making significant changes whilst recognising the temporary nature of his appointment. The systems for reporting to governors are also much improved. However, some of the reporting methods lack appropriate formality, for example minutes and records of meetings.

Those responsible for managing individual subjects continue to develop their roles although this is not consistent. Most have an increasing awareness of the strengths and weaknesses in their subjects and are starting to monitor the quality of teaching and learning appropriately. In particular, a programme of classroom observations and work analysis to measure individual pupil progress is developing well and contributing to school planning. These developments remain recent, however, and are only starting to have the desired impact.

The school continues to benefit considerably from the work of the acting deputy headteacher. She manages the use of data and assessment information increasingly effectively alongside providing a strong role model for teaching and subject management. The governors acknowledge, however, that this expertise is temporary and that much of the good work currently being undertaken is being done by staff not permanently employed by the school.

A timetable of lesson observations has been developed but this is new and feedback does not always contain enough detail to ensure teaching continues to improve. For example, some observations are descriptive rather than evaluative and too brief. The school has appropriate plans to complete a full self-evaluation exercise as part of its process of review. The current team has the capacity to continue the improvement but recognises that the changes need time to become established consistently.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- ensure the role of the Headteacher includes effective leadership of the school's priorities for improvement, including providing accurate reports on the progress to the governing body – satisfactory progress.
- establish a senior management structure that enables staff to fulfil their responsibilities within a team approach – satisfactory progress.
- establish a clear management responsibility for pupils' progress throughout the school – good progress.

External support

The school continues to get good support from the local authority. This is increasingly focused on monitoring pupil progress and developing staff expertise. In particular, the commitment to support the current staffing structure until the uncertainty in staffing is resolved is valued by the school community.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

Priorities for improvement given during the last monitoring visit

Establish a rigorous system of monitoring teaching that develops the role of subject leaders – satisfactory progress.

Establish a senior management structure which secures improvements in standards and that is sustainable – satisfactory.

Develop an effective curriculum in the Foundation Stage which builds upon the good practice in the nursery – satisfactory progress.

Priorities for further improvement

- Complete a full self-evaluation of the school's progress to date and use this to set the next stage of priorities.
- Establish a timetable for staff development which includes paired observations and focuses clearly on the progress pupils are making.
- Ensure the use of assessment information is consistent across all classes.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the diocesan Director of Schools, the advisory Headteacher and the Director of Children and Lifelong Learning for Staffordshire.

Yours sincerely

Ceri Morgan
H M Inspector